

The Influence of Media on Public Opinion - Taking Internet Rumor Propagation as An Example

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Abstract: With the vigorous development of social media, the Internet has become the hardest-hit area for rumor propagation. Various unaudited remarks released by the public or the media can easily lead to serious public opinion crises. Therefore, it is very important to explore the causes of rumor generation, communication, and solutions. Based on the case of Internet rumor propagation of the 2018 Chongqing Bus falling into the river, this paper analyzes the rumor propagation of the incident from the perspective of the media and the public and the aspects of the "third-person effect", "stereotype", "spiral of silence", visual images and more. Research has found that the media plays a very important role in the process of rumor spreading, especially the official media, because they usually have significant authority and trust among the public. The public's subjective reactions, such as emotional reactions and stereotypes, also lead to their inability to analyze rumors objectively. Rational speech cannot be spread in this public opinion crisis because it is emotionally opposed and attacked by most people. Therefore, the mainstream media should standardize their behavior and responsibilities and pay attention to the authenticity of the news. The public should also enhance their discrimination ability and avoid the deterioration of the public opinion environment.

Keywords: Media, Public Opinion, Internet rumor, Propagation

1. Introduction

The influence of media on public opinion has become a topic of general concern in society. With the development of science and technology and the promotion of mobile devices, the threshold for people to access the Internet has become lower and lower, and the network and social media have also been integrated into people's lives. The China Internet Network Information Center released the 50th statistical report on the development of China's Internet in Beijing. As of June 2022, the number of Internet users in China was 1.051 billion, and the Internet penetration rate reached 74.4%. The rapid development of the Internet has also shifted the media of visual information from newspapers and magazines based on words to visual social media based on pictures and videos, such as TikTok and Twitter. According to the report, as of June 2022, the number of short video users in China had increased most significantly, reaching 962 million, an increase of 28.05 million over December 2021, accounting for 91.5% of the total number of Internet users. However, a series of problems caused by the above-mentioned visual media, such as online rumors, online violence, and online fraud, has hurt the development of visual media and the trend of public opinion.

Past literature indicates that visuals can drive public opinion [1]. Short video rumors have a stronger stimulation effect on the audience than other types of rumors, which can quickly mobilize the audience's emotions in a short time under the combined effect of a variety of information

dissemination methods [2]. False information based on videos or pictures on social media is easier to mobilize the audience's emotions and make them believe that this is the truth. However, how does the media affect public opinion? What factors are driving this process? What are their impacts? How can the public avoid this? The discussion of these issues has great significance in improving the public opinion environment and promoting the sound progress of the media.

By using the method of case analysis, this paper reviews the classic case - the incident of Chongqing falling into the river in 2018 - and the subsequent reports of mainstream media and the trend of public opinion analyzes some links of the incident from a theoretical perspective, and offers reasonable solutions.

2. Case Description

At 10:08 a.m. on October 28, 2018, a bus and a car collided on the Second Yangtze River Bridge in Wanzhou District, Chongqing. The bus then fell into the river. The accident killed 13 people and left 2 missings. However, in the subsequent reports, some mainstream media reported false news to increase traffic. At 11:27, Chongqing Youth Daily reported on the Weibo platform that "it is said that the accident was caused by the female driver driving the red private car retrograde on the bridge...". Later, at 13:19, the Beijing news released the so-called more reliable news, "We learned from the Wanzhou emergency office that the accident was caused by the retrograde red car."

In the later period, the media continued to report this rumor. At the same time, relevant videos and pictures were continuously reproduced on the Internet, and online violence against female drivers was also carried out on the Internet.

However, at 17:50 that afternoon, Chongqing Wanzhou issued a police notice, saying that the accident was caused by the bus suddenly crossing the center line and colliding with a normal red car. Some media have deleted relevant reports and clarified rumors about female drivers. This reversal also made many netizens feel magical.

In this case, the following questions need to be studied: how does the media affect public opinion to cause rumors to spread? What factors are driving this process? What are their impacts? How to avoid this situation?

3. Analysis of the Problems

3.1. Media

With its effectiveness, authenticity, comprehensiveness, interactivity, and synchronization, the media has been supported by the public and has become the main source of increasing breaking news, through which people can learn about all kinds of things happening in society for the first time [3]. With the development of mass media, people also rely more on social media to obtain information. However, excessive reliance on these media will also lead to a series of drawbacks. Why is the world today concerned about the media and its social impact? Because media influences public opinion and models attitudes, behaviors, and reactions [4]. It can also be seen from this incident that the media played a very important role from beginning to end. The public's understanding of the contents of the incident came from the media reports, and the media dominated the trend of public opinion. From the initial release of false information to the final refutation of rumors and clarification for female drivers, the public's attitude also changed from the initial anger to the final embarrassment, and then later pointed the spearhead at the media that initially released rumors. In this stage, bad behaviors such as online violence also cause bad consequences for the female drivers involved.

Social media, through its huge user base, constitutes a relay station for information. People can easily upload what happens around them to social media. In the era of information explosion, people have to deal with a large amount of information every day, which means that if some information is

false, it will be difficult to find. In such a case, those media whose main purpose is to release news should assume the responsibility of filtering and verifying the authenticity of the information.

3.2. Third-person Effect, Stereotype, and Spiral of Silence

The so-called third-person effect phenomenon suggests that people believe others to be more affected by media messages than themselves [5]. When individuals encounter information with strong inducement and persuasion, they will overestimate themselves and underestimate others. People often think that they will have the ability to think rationally. In this incident, in addition to the rumors released by the official media, under the influence of the spliced untrue videos circulating in WeChat groups and other circles and the public opinion on social media, most people will think that the rumors are true rationally, which has intensified the spread of rumors and led to the event getting out of control.

The stereotype is the cognitive component of a biased attitude, which rationalizes his or her prejudice against the group by affecting the individual [6]. With the disclosure of more on-site texts and pictures, "female driver" and "high-heeled shoes" have also made people more firmly believe in the truth of the rumors, and they have formed the inference of the so-called true situation in their minds. Because in the traditional concept, female drivers represent unskilled driving and non-compliance with traffic rules, when this group of female drivers is labeled, the identity of accident culprits becomes reasonable. Certainly, this is not only a one-way process. In this process of information dissemination, the personal views previously held also play a certain role in the formation and deepening of stereotypes.

When people express their views and find that they are agreed upon and welcomed by most people, they will think that their views are correct. On the contrary, if it is opposed and criticized by most people, this view will rarely appear in front of the public. Therefore, people's judgment of their behavior largely depends on the reaction of others and the number of people who hold the same view. In fact, by analyzing the pictures and videos at the time of the incident, it can be seen that the bus is the side running in the opposite direction. However, limited by the public opinion environment at that time, people generally believed in the reports of the official media, and they made their judgments on the facts. Therefore, when the voice of rationality appeared that the female driver did not drive in the opposite direction and was immediately refuted or even attacked by most people. Therefore, at that time, people who held rational views would not speak out on this matter.

Some official media mislead the public through stereotyped words, which makes rumors seem more authentic. Due to blind worship of authority and logical inference that is rational, people are more convinced of the authenticity of event reports. The spiral of silence makes people who are truly rational dare not speak out. Under the processing of this system, public opinion is guided in the wrong direction.

3.3. Visual Information and Emotion

In this incident, in addition to the distorted statements issued by some authoritative media, pictures and videos wildly spread on the Internet also played a strong driving force. Past studies suggest visuals have a variety of emotional and attitudinal effects and may relate positively to shaping public perceptions and an understanding of news events [7]. In all kinds of visual information, pictures and videos are easier to catch the eyes of the audience than boring words. This kind of visual image, which directly affects the vision, also makes it easier for the public to produce various emotions. When all kinds of bloody false pictures are seen by the public, in videos without cause and effect, people often bring themselves to the vulnerable side, especially in such major accidents; there will

always be one party who has to bear the venting of public emotions. Anger, pity, sadness, and other emotions will lead them to ignore some details that can prove false.

3.4. Influence

With the release of the latest situation, things have changed. The official media, which should be responsible for disseminating real information, has instead become the source of confusion in the public opinion environment in this incident. The aphasia of accurate, authoritative information makes the public blindly believe and spread rumors, and the public opinion caused by rumors will also be in a situation that is difficult to control, resulting in the social public opinion environment constantly out of control and public anxiety [8]. Under this farce, the credibility of the official media will inevitably decline, and the stereotype of the official media spreading false information will also form in the minds of the public.

The spread of rumors leads to online violence and harms the parties. In this incident, netizens who deeply believe in the official media also conducted human flesh searches, invective, and other online violence against the female driver, which is not conducive to the development of the online public opinion environment. In addition, the incident also led to the further deepening of the public's prejudice against the group of female drivers and intensified the contradictions among the groups.

It destroys social stability, disrupts social order, and intensifies social panic. Because image rumors spread widely, involve many social media users, and have great influence, major social emergencies are bound to attract more attention. The actions of illegal elements using technical means to splice video pictures, incite netizens' emotions, and guide Internet public opinion will also aggravate negative emotions on the Internet and cause serious consequences.

The legitimate rights and interests of the public would be harmed. The public's right to know needs to be reflected through the true reports of the media. The reports of the right to know cannot be separated from news reports and information disclosure [9]. The public has the right to know the true situation of the incident. However, a large number of unverified false information flooded the Internet, resulting in the public being unable to understand the facts. The incomplete understanding of the event also led to the deviation of public opinion from the discussion of the event itself and became a way for the public to vent their emotions.

With the advent of the age of network media, the influence of objective facts on the formation of public opinion will be reduced, while resorting to emotions and personal beliefs will have a greater impact [10]. The objectivity of the truth will no longer exist. Instead, people's subjective views will determine the truth of the matter, conspiracy theories will prevail, and groups will face a serious trust crisis.

4. Suggestions

The authenticity of news cannot give way to the timeliness of news. In the information age, the public demands the timeliness of the mass media more and more. For the public, knowing the news for the first time may not have any substantive significance but only satisfy their curiosity. However, for the media, the faster the speed of releasing information, the more attention it will get, and the more traffic and income it will have. In this case, some media will ignore the authenticity of news for the sake of traffic. The increasingly complex public opinion environment and the diversity of interest demands of various groups make social public opinion crises more frequent, which is conducive to exposing the truth and improving governance but may also bring local order chaos [11]. In this accident, the two media did not fulfill the responsibility of exposing the truth and guiding public opinion in the right direction. Instead, they released untrue information to gain public attention, which aggravated the public opinion crisis, catalyzed the negative emotions of netizens, and hurt innocent people.

Therefore, when releasing news, news media should put the authenticity of news in the first place, seek truth from facts, guide public opinion in the right direction, and avoid chaos.

The public needs to enhance their ability to think independently. One of the reasons for the spread of rumors about the incident was the blind trust of the public in the authority of the official media. Before the police had investigated the cause of the incident, they chose to believe it unconditionally. In addition, strong emotional reactions also make them lose the ability to think independently and join the ranks of online violence. In the process of rumor spreading, every participant is not innocent. Personal retweets, likes, and comments seem insignificant, but when a large number of people do the same thing, it will form a strong thrust and provide a channel for rumor spreading. Therefore, in the face of rumors, major events, and other situations, the public should develop the ability to think independently, rather than to look at problems one-sidedly, draw conclusions easily, make inappropriate remarks easily, and abide by the constraints of morality and law.

There should be attention to the use of visual images. The evidence suggests that news coverage that contains visual images may have a greater ability than text-only first, to activate one's news-relevant considerations, and second, to prompt a 'carryover' of these activated constructs to subsequent judgments regarding related concerns [12]. In news reports containing visual images, people first pay attention to visual images so that visual images will give the reconceived public views to a certain extent. In the incident, the public, given the photos of the female driver in question wildly spread on the Internet, combined with the stereotype of the female driver, easily believed that the female driver had caused the incident. Images interact with individuals' predispositions, experiences, and values to shape information processing judgments [7].

5. Conclusion

Depending on the government and national background, the official media often represents authority and authenticity. In news reports, people are more willing to believe them. Therefore, when these media respond to certain events, people take it for granted that this is the fact. Under such a premise, when the official media rely on its authority and easily draws conclusions about the incident without investigation, it will naturally attract other media to report the so-called truth. A large number of media reports on untrue information make the public blindly believe rumors and spread rumors.

The stereotype of the media and a certain group aggravates the spread of rumors and induces the occurrence of online violence. The false images have also strengthened the public's wrong understanding of this event, which may lead the audience to ignore the facts themselves, make it easier to understand and believe rumors and form views with strong emotional colors. The strong emotional response of the public also causes them to lose the ability of rational think. In this case, the rational voice is suppressed by the emotional response of the public. They may not care about the truth anymore but want to vent their emotions. Under the joint action of various factors, rumors are spread, and public opinion is out of control.

The media should also take the dissemination of facts as the primary purpose in the process of news communication, guide the correct direction of public opinion, and use visual images with confidence and discretion to avoid public opinion crises caused by wrong interpretation or deliberate interpretation as far as possible. In addition, the public should also improve their ability to think independently and critically. They should not look at problems one-sidedly. Before the truth of the matter is found out, they should not make judgments too early to stifle the spread of rumors from the source.

This paper first analyzes the influence of the main body and content of communication on the spread of rumors. In the process of communication, different factors have different effects on the spread of rumors, and their ways of action are also different. This is conducive to clarifying the differences between various factors and understanding the process of rumor spreading more clearly.

Secondly, by proposing reasonable solutions, it is conducive to promoting the sound development of media, regulating Internet news communication, and creating a good Internet public opinion environment.

Finally, this paper only roughly analyzes the factors that affect the spread of rumors and does not carry out an in-depth analysis and systematic connection of various factors. It can be further refined on this basis in the future to facilitate in-depth research on this topic.

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